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ABSTRACT

Recent educational reform by proponents of multiculturalism and diversity has tended to identify with cultures other than the dominant one and to embrace variations in race, gender, age, or others. However, this trend has caused a backlash by conservative elements against what has become known as "political correctness," a backlash which in turn has been extended to include an attack on the new emphasis on critical thinking. Critical thinking should be thought of as the foundation of all successful problem solving and decision making, with roots dating back to Socrates. Recently, especially in the 1980s, it has seen a great renaissance of interest and prestige among educators. This sharp rise contrasts with the 1950s, a period when America demonstrated an anti-intellectual atmosphere which put little emphasis on critical thinking. Today's students appear to be poorly prepared as critical thinkers, and critical thinking skills have a crucial role to play in the inquiry of values and the fostering of effective citizenship. In spite of this lack, critical thinking initiatives have constantly faced attack from the conservative agenda. Rather than attack the attempts to deal with the growing global diversity and multicultural perspectives in society, educators should recognize critical thinking ventures as worthwhile and valuable moves toward greater understanding and tolerance. In short, critical thinking performed in an atmosphere of, and with an attitude of, intellectual courage will be society's greatest strength in meeting challenges and diversity without fear. (Twenty-six footnotes are attached.) (HB)

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CRITICAL THINKING:
FRIEND OR FOE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Proponents of multiculturalism and diversity called forth reforms in the 1980's that have resulted in division and conflict among educational thinkers as well as the general public. Generally speaking, these terms refer to tendencies to identify with cultures other than the dominant one and to embrace variations in race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, etc. Consequently, calls for reform have included "greater sensitivity to cultural and gender differences, and incorporation into the curriculum of material pertaining to minority and non-Western cultures and to the contributions and perspectives of women."[1] Accordingly, "Such reforms are advocated to expand and enrich the educational experience for all students, rather than simply to meet the needs of particular groups."[2] Differing values, thus, are the cornerstone of the conflict surrounding these reforms.

As a result of the juxtapositioning of traditional thinking versus reform thinking, a "backlash" has occurred known as "political correctness", which Catherine Stimpson described as a "rhetorical virus . . . spreading through higher education and the media," which she explains has been engaged to "package" and assault an entire range of views and positions.[3] Critical thinking, indirectly, has emerged as part of the backlash against political correctness.

Political correctness, or "pc" as the popular press has abbreviated the term, typically has been defined by conservatives

as a type of "moralizing dogmatism" instituted by "thought police." Some would argue as an article in The Humanist did that:

> The backlash against political correctness and multiculturalism in American education has a carefully crafted political agenda: to annihilate the progressive gains achieved at American universities since the 1960's . . . while ensuring that conservative ideologies thrive.[4]

How, though, is critical thinking part of the aim of this backlash? This paper will offer a response to this question by presenting 1) a conceptual orientation to critical thinking, 2) an explanation of what processes and skills are involved in critical thinking, and 3) an analysis of the reasons why critical thinking is to be considered a target of attacks against political correctness, and why it does not deserve to be.

Critical thinking challenges and disciplines the mind. It is higher order thinking that is central to the complexities of the global demands and realities facing us today and in the future. Critical thinking is the key to insightfully envisioning our choices, as well as providing us with the skills to enact those choices, and then to evaluate the merit of choices made. Critical thinking is the foundation of successful problem solving and decision making, most importantly in terms of its ability to provide the skills to answer the challenges of multiculturalism.

Socrates laid the foundation for critical thinking in Western civilization. His insistence upon reason and rationality as the guiding principles of human conduct set a standard for individual thinking. Moreover, Socrates avowed that "teachers cannot be educators in the fullest sense unless they can criticize the received

assumptions of their social groups and are willing to nurture a climate of questioning and doubt among their students."[5] Distinguished North American anthropologist William Graham Sumner also attached great importance to individual thought. "The critical faculty," Sumner stated, "is our only guarantee against delusion, deception, superstition, and misapprehension of ourselves and our early circumstances."[6] For Sumner, "Education in the critical faculty is the only education of which it can be truly said that it makes good citizens."[7]

More recently, acclaimed critical thinking scholar Richard Paul has characterized critical thinking in this manner: "Its deepest development requires a commitment to fairmindedness and entails an ability to enter empathically into the thinking of others, to reason across a variety of disciplines and domains, and to critique our own thinking from the perspective of others."[8]

Even though Socrates initiated the educational use of critical thinking, and then in 1940 the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal appeared, followed by Glaser's 1941 book entitled An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking, the critical thinking movement did not formally begin until the 1980's. In his book, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, Richard Hofstadter maintained that critical intelligence as a national resource was consistently de-valued in the 1950's.[9] Hofstadter believed that the educational system of the 1950's promoted rote learning to the neglect of cultivating critical thinking. Anti-intellectualism, according to Hofstadter, accounted for this negligence. Intellectuals were feared for their independent and unrestricted thought,

for as Hoftstadter explained: "The intellect is always on the move against something: some oppression, fraud, illusion, dogma, or interest is constantly falling under the scrutiny of the intellectual class and becoming the object of exposure, indigestion, or ridicule."[10]

As a contrast to this period, the 1960's and 1970's brought numerous curricular innovations, many of which were considered to be radical in both intent and form. Allan Bloom's controversial book, The Closing of the American Mind, pointed to a variety of examples where universities diverted attention away from a reliance on universal and timeless truths toward reliance on "relevance."[11] That cry for relevance has continued through the present, although its dimensions have broadened to account for the diversity and multicultural differences that face us in light of current and future global realities. One of those dimensions is the focus of this paper: critical thinking.

Critical thinking is a vital component of educational reforms as well as a valuable investment in our future. Unfortunately, students are generally not prepared to think critically. They have the innate abilities to do so, but those abilities have not been cultivated. One of the research findings, explained by Mary Kennedy, professor of education at Michigan State University, documents a serious concern:

> . . . national assessments in virtually every subject indicate that . . . they [our students] are not doing well on thinking and reasoning. American students can compute, but they cannot reason. . . . They can write complete and correct sentences, but they cannot prepare arguments. . . . Our students are not doing well at thinking, reasoning, analyzing, predicting, estimating, or problem solving.[12]

While there are many variables that can account for this gloomy outlook, one that is the concern of the critical thinking movement is that students have not, for the most part, been forced (or perhaps allowed) to take responsibility for their own learning and thinking. Student passivity for learning is characterized by a lack of independent thought and sound intellectual skills, and an attitude toward intellectual work that is deficient in concern and attention to accuracy, substance, and creativity.

In order to elevate students to this higher level of thinking, critical thinking skills need to be cultivated in students. Students must develop skills of inquiry; of making connections between ideas and insights; of searching for underlying causes, reasons, and principles; of analyzing and regulating their own thoughts and reasoning to make reasonable and appropriate conclusions; and skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening critically. Students must be more than simple consumers or receivers of experience, thus they must learn how to be independent, creative, and focused in their thoughts, choices, and behaviors.

The pedagogical implications are far reaching, but essentially, the teaching of critical thinking skills leads students to be able to 1) monitor their own thinking, and 2) recognize the merit of, and reason within, multiple viewpoints.

As Richard Paul argued, "Teaching critical thinking in a strong sense is a powerful, and . . . necessary means to moral integrity and responsible citizenship."[13] Paul's rationale for his position is explained this way:

> Critical thinking . . . is not simply a matter of cognitive skills. . . . Intellectual and

> moral virtues or disabilities are intimately interconnected. To cultivate the kind of intellectual independence implied in the concept of strong sense critical thinking, we must recognize the need to foster intellectual (epistemological) humility, courage, integrity, perseverance, empathy, and fairmindedness.[14]

Of particular importance to the discussion forthcoming in this paper is Paul's concept of intellectual courage, which:

> . . . is connected with the recognition that ideas considered dangerous or absurd are sometimes rationally justified (in whole or in part) and that conclusions and beliefs inculcated in us are sometimes false and misleading. To determine for ourselves which is which, we must not passively and uncritically 'accept' what we have 'learned.' Intellectual courage comes into play here, because inevitably we will come to see some truth in some ideas considered dangerous and absurd, and distortion or falsity in some ideas strongly held in our social group. We need courage to be true to our own thinking in such circumstances.[15]

If we accept Paul's arguments, then it is absolutely clear that critical thinking has a crucial role to play in the inquiry of values, that is, exploring, discovering, analyzing, and listening to a host of competing perspectives.

As an inquiry process, critical thinking opens up an examination of values rather than invading values. Critical thinking is an inclusive ideology that seeks to make one and all capable of meeting the challenges they face. Furthermore, critical thinking exposes and explores values so that we are not taken hostage by them, but instead, we are equipped to know our available choices, to then make our own well informed and well reasoned choices, and finally, to independently evaluate the merit of those choices.

Intrinsic to American higher education are such values as "the importance of preserving, transmitting, and advancing know-

ledge, which is itself, value-laden; the centrality of reason; the insistence on inquiry, critical thinking and an open mind; democratic principles, and academic freedom."[16] But this seemingly admirable list of values is at the very center of a heated controversy that pits conservatives who fear indoctrination, against liberal thinkers who contend that a multicultural perspective is a rational and acceptable way of thinking. In offering insight concerning this controversy, historian Joan Scott contended that, "What we are witnessing these days is not simply a set of internal debates about what universities should teach and what students should learn."[17] More importantly, Scott suggested, "The entire enterprise of the university has come under attack, and with it that aspect that intellectuals most value and that the humanities most typically represent: a critical, skeptical approach to all that a society takes most for granted."[18]

In the current debates there are questions and conflicts about what knowledge is, from whose perspective should knowledge be defined, and so on. Many of those campaigning against political correctness, in Scott's view, "simply promote their orthodoxy in the name of an unquestioned and unquestionable tradition, universality, or history."[19] Scott further noted, "They attack those who challenge their ideas as dangerous and subversive, antithetical to the academic enterprise. They offer themselves as apostles of timeless truths, when in fact they are enemies of change."[20] Finally, Scott sounded an alarm for educators about the impact of this conservative platform, for it "would deny us our most valuable--and pleasurable--activity: thinking hard about everything, from

obscure texts to our present condition, and teaching others how to think that way."[21] The ongoing debate between conservative and liberal agendas requires that we apply an objective analysis to the situation and search for ways to answer concerns of the goals and processes of education.

It is at this point that critical thinking joins the list of university practices that conservative agendas fear. Many conservatives hold that education is about undisputed knowledge, or "timeless truths" that should simply be "transmitted" rather than produced, discussed, or analyzed.[22] These "timeless truths" are certainly safer ground that the issues and concerns of multiculturalism and diversity. As Betty Jean Craige, professor of comparative literature at the University of Georgia explained:

> Scholars who are investigating social prejudices imbedded in our literary masterpieces are inevitably drawing attention to our culture's ideology, questioning cherished beliefs and long-held opinions. Their intellectual work is therefore dangerous to those like Mrs. Cheney [Lynn Cheney, National Endowment for the Humanities], whose power depends on unquestioning approval of our present social system.[23]

Because critical thinking necessarily involves values inquiry, exploration, and analysis, it allows students the means with which to engage in open questioning and challenging of a host of issues, often resulting in a much more multicultural and diverse point of view than traditional rote thinking has provided. Critical thinking moves students from a "parrot" role to that of active pursuer of knowledge. Critical thinking, as a process, does not dictate the conclusions finally reached. Proponents of critical thinking do not presuppose that students will, or should, arrive at liberal

views and decisions as a result of engaging in the exploration of knowledge directly. In fact, one of the fundamental tenets of critical thinking is to engage in open discussion rather than conversion. Answers are not pre-determined and packaged. There is value in questioning timeless truths whether one arrives at the same point as they began, or with a new way of viewing that truth. Critical thinking proponents do not claim to "know the truth", only to provide a way for each person to discover their own truths. But many conservatives would have us move back to the "anti-intellectualism" of the 1950's that Hofstadter described, thereby eliminating the postmodern educational advances and thought of the 1960's and beyond.

The reality of the present and future is one of global diversity, challenges, and demands. Whether from liberals or conservatives, "moralizing dogmatism" will not adequately prepare us to address these challenges and demands. Critical thinking sifts through political agendas by rising above them and providing a means to assess divergent values with an objective, uncluttered vision. Critical thinking is not a property of minority or radical opinion. To the contrary, it is quite simply what higher education should be about--higher order thinking. Our concern should not be whether or not critical thinking is politically correct, for as Scott acknowledged, "while it is surely true that there are within universities--on the left and right--people who would impose their ways of thinking on everyone else, they do not represent the majority, and they have never gained control."[24] In fact, Scott continued, "One of the tricks of the publicists has

been to conflate serious criticism and intolerant moralism under the label of 'political correctness,' and thereby discredit all critical efforts."[25] This is indeed a serious misrepresentation not only of intellectualism, but of what diversity, variance, and critical thinking are all about. Critical thinking should not become a scapegoat for the limited number of abuses of open questioning of values. Critical thinking does not invade nor impose values. It allows values to be studied and analyzed to determine their merit. Those who politically ordain a particular point of view as the only correct view seemingly abuse the functions and goals of critical thinking. But this is a fault of the user, not the process of critical thinking. In fact, such ordination of views is antithetical to the ideals of critical thinking.

In a 1991 Report of the State System of Higher Education Task Force on Values Education in Pennsylvania, it was argued that "universities do represent and subscribe to certain values and that we should recognize, communicate, and model--we should 'teach'--those values to our students."[26] Higher education is confronted with determining ways to help students understand the complex value issues stemming from our diverse and multicultural society, or at least it should be concerned with providing this assistance. This task can be accomplished through the skills, techniques, and goals of critical thinking. Students can be asked to examine the values they hold, and the ones that society holds. In their examination, students can then explore and inquire about the consistency of these values, their appropriateness for the situation, their ability to meet the needs of the situation, and

the sincerity of the attachment to those values. The only justifiable fear would be in not providing these kinds of opportunities for our students. Ideas, even if unpopular, are not what is dangerous to us; what is dangerous is the lack of opportunity to confront those ideas with a critical mind. Diversity is a reality. Multiculturalism is a reality. Helping students to cope with the issues, concerns, and problems that arise within these frameworks of reality can be facilitated through the practice of critical, higher order thinking.

Remember Richard Paul's admonition to cultivate "intellectual courage" in our students. Critical thinking performed in an atmosphere of, and with an attitude of, intellectual courage, will be our greatest strength in meeting challenges and diversity without fear.

ENDNOTES

[1]"Emphasis on Values: A Priority for Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education during the 1990s," Report of the State System of Higher Education Task Force on Values Education, August 1991, 31.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid., 32.

[4]Scott Henson and Tom Philpott, "The Right Declares a Culture War," The Humanist 52:2 (March/April 1992), 10.

[5]Cited in Richard Paul, Critical Thinking: What Every Person Needs to Survive in a Rapidly Changing World, 2e., (Santa Rosa, California: Foundation for Critical Thinking, 1992), 188.

[6]Ibid., 168.

[7]Ibid.

[8]The Center for Critical Thinking, Regional Institutes on Critical Thinking Teaching Strategies Brochure, 1991-1992, 18.

[9]Richard Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life (New York: Knopf Publishing, 1962).

[10]Ibid., 45.

[11]Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished The Souls of Today's Students (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

[12]Regional Institutes on Critical Thinking Teaching Strategies Brochure, 4.

[13]Paul, 257, 261-62.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid., 262.

[16]Report of the State System of Higher Education Task Force on Values Education, 9.

[17]Joan Scott, "The Campaign Against Political Correctness: What's Really at Stake? Change 23 (November/December 1991), 30.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid.

[22]For example, see William Bennet's 1984 report on humanities education entitled "To Reclaim a Legacy," and Lynne V. Cheney's 1990 NEH report entitled "Tyrannical Machines: A Report on Educational Practices Gone Wrong and Our Best Hopes for Setting Them Right."

[23]Cited in, Stephen Burd, "Humanities Chief Assails Politicization of Classrooms," The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 30, 1992, A21-22.

[24]Scott, 36.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Report of the State System of Higher Education Task Force on Values Education, 11.